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St. Charles to Patrick's to St. Jerome's

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PITTSFIELD

On Ash Wednesdays, we schoolchildren at St. Charles would march over to church to receive our penitential marks. Returning to our pews, we compared one another's black smudges planted on pale foreheads -- the smearier the better. From the altar Father Foley would say, "Now, children, find the strength to give up something dear to your hearts during this season of Lent." Each of us would solemnly bow and privately pledge to God the ultimate sacrifice -- to give up candy for six long, agonizing weeks!

I, too, murmured my promise to God, but my track record was not promising. Somewhere between the 14th and 21st day, I'd usually find myself gazing longingly into Mom's tin of Tavener's Fruit Drops and, before I could say Jiminy Cricket, I was gobbling one whole.

However, at age 12, I miraculously abstained for the whole Forty Days, but a hideous trait arose in me that Easter Sunday. Like a rabid fox, I woke at sunrise and greedily devoured chocolate bunnies and Cadbury eggs till I bellied-up in pain, my first hint of a ravenous disposition. It was no surprise that alcohol replaced chocolate as my preferred treat in adulthood, and like sweets, I failed miserably in my quest to give up "the drink" for Lent, due largely to St. Patrick's Day.

"Hey, O'Hara," an ex-classmate shouted upon spying me slink out of Nichol's Package Store one St. Pat's morning, "what's a good Catholic boy like you doing buying beer during Lent?"

"Listen, wise guy," I fired back, "do you think we could've given up candy for Lent if Halloween fell smack dab in the middle of it?"

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Not that I have a full-blown drinking problem -- dear me, no -- but after two weeks of Lenten sobriety, I could eat the glass around a pint of Guinness. Acknowledging this weakness, while still striving for abstinence, I've tailored the Lenten Season with one wee compromise: give up drink for most of Lent, yes, but imbibe freely on St. Patrick's Day.

Needless to say, I leap from my bed to celebrate the Briton on his pattern day, starting with a hearty Irish breakfast. When my mom was still with us instead of the saints, I'd call her and say I'd be over that evening with her supper, after "a few jars at Patrick's Pub." I'd next tackle a score of household chores; not to make points with the Lord or my dear bride, Belita, but to work up one grand thirst. I'd also skip lunch, believing in the old Irish adage, "The emptier the pouch, the headier the drink."

Belita would often accompany me to Patrick's, but snow fell heavy on this saint's day, and she -- the wiser head -- declined the outing, suggesting I either walk or get a lift from friends. Walk? Are you kidding me! I'd stomp the Royal Road to Tara barefoot if a pint was promised atop its regal crown!

So with lips cracking at the thought of a rich creamy pint, I set off with light step for the pub's cherry confines, where my first pint went down as smooth as Jersey milk. More pints flowed amid the joyous din of tin whistles and screeching fiddles, while lovely lasses, sporting "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" buttons, puckered their lips invitingly toward my mates and -- dare I say it -- to my own modest mug.

Only the thought of my lovely bride, and my mom's hunger pangs, pulled me safely from the place. With a steaming Shepherd's Pie cradled in my arms, I navigated the icy maze to Berkshiretown on Columbus Avenue. Panting and shivering, I found my mother's door ajar.

"Is that you, Kevin?" my mom's white hair peeked over her well-cushioned chair. "You'll find yourself a beer in the fridge." Oh, bless dear Irish mothers everywhere!

Mom was watching Mass on TV, sitting up so reverently you'd think she was a member of the choir. The setting was so pious, it felt like I was opening a can of beer in the church sacristy -- the tab exploded like a hand grenade.

Pleasantly snookered, I sat beside my mother and gazed at the small flickering screen, only half-comprehending Bishop Joseph Maguire's heartfelt homily. This Mass, aired annually from St. Jerome's in Holyoke, had been a celebrated tradition in my parents' home for decades.

Mom broke through my foggy swoon: "Mayor Ray Flynn of Boston is this year's recipient of the JFK Award. I'll never forget the night Maurice O'Hara won. Why, your father was so proud, you'd think it was one of our own."

I slumped back in my seat, sipping my beer and watching Mom as she devotedly followed the Mass, bowing her head frequently in prayer. What has happened to me, I thought, and where has my faith flown?

After the service, Mom enjoyed her dinner while gladly showing me greeting cards she had received from friends back in Ireland. When I departed, she sprinkled me with holy water from the shrine of Knock. "Give my best to Belita, and please call me as soon as you arrive home."

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This St. Patrick's Night, sadly, there'll be no visit to Berkshiretown, no televised Mass, no splash of holy water at my mother's back door. For this saintly woman has taken her earthly leave to join Dad in that boundless glory of the hereafter.

A great pity, that, for on this St. Patrick's Night, I can only imagine the pair's pride when looking down dubiously on their son from above, as he fidgets in a new blue suit at St. Jerome's Church, awaiting the call to the altar from Bishop Timothy McConnell.

Yes, beyond all odds -- a miracle of the saints, surely -- I'm this year's recipient of that JFK award, and I've little doubt that my parents haven't orchestrated this honor from above, seeing something in me I must now rally to find in myself.

Kevin O'Hara is this year's recipient of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy National Award. He writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Eagle.

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